## THE OMAHA ILLUSTRATED BEE

Le Premier Pas

Author of "The Shadow of the Rope," "The Rogue's March." "A Bride from the Bush," "Stingaree Stories," "Dead Men Tell No

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Tales," etc.

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## Third Raffles Story

HAT night he told me the story of his carliest crime. Not since the fateful morning of the Ides of March, when he had just mentioned it as an unreported incident of a certain cricket tour, had I succeeded in getting a word out of Raffles on the subject. It was not for want of trying; he would shake his head and watch his cigarette smoke thoughtfully, a subtle look in his eyes, half cynical, half wistful, as though the decent, honest days that were no more had had their merits after all. Raffles would plan a fresh enormity or glory in the last with the unmitigated enthusiasm of the artist. It was impossible to imagine one throb or twitter of compunction beneath those frankly egotistic and infectious transports. And yet the ghost of a dead remorse seemed still to visit him with the memory of his first felony, so that I had given the story up long before the night of our return from Milchester. Cricket, however, was in the air, and Raffles' cricket bag, back where he sometimes kept it, in the fender, with the remains of an Orient label still adhering to the leather. My eyes had been on this label for some time, and I suppose his eyes had been on mine, for all at once he asked me if I still burned to hear that yarn.

"It's no use," I replied. "You won't spin it. I must imagine it for myself."

"How can you?"

"Oh, I begin to know your methods."

"You take it I went in with my eyes open, as I do now, ch?"

"I can't imagine your doing otherwise." "My dear Bunny, it was the most unpremediated thing I ever did in my life."

His chair wheeled back into the books as he sprang up with sudden energy. There was quite an indignant glitter in his eyes.

"I can't believe that," said I, craftily. "I can't pay you such a poor compliment."

"Then you must be a fool-"

He broke off, stared hard at me, and in a trice stood smiling in his own despite.

"Or a better knave than I thought you, Bunny, and by jove, it's the knave! Well-I suppose I'm fairly drawn; I give you best, as they say out there. As a matter of fact, I've been thinking of the matter myself; last night's racket reminds me of it in one or two respects. I tell you what, though, this is an occasion in any case, and I'm going to celebrate it by breaking the one good rule of my life. I'm going to have a second drink!"

The whisky tinkled, the syphon fizzed, the ice plopped home; and seated there in his pajamas, with the inevitable cigarette, Raffles told me the story that I had given up hoping to hear. The windows were wide open; the sounds of Piccadilly floated in at first. Long before he finished the last wheels had rattled, the last brawler was removed, we alone broke the quiet of the summer night.

"\* \* \* No, they do you very well, indeed. You pay for nothing but the drinks, so to speak, but I'm afraid mine were of a comprehensive character. I had started in a hole, I ought really to have refused the invitation; then we all went to the



pity's usually cant; and besides, all mine was needed for myself. "I was in as big a hole as ever. What the devil was I to do? I doubt if I had sufficiently impressed upon you the absolute necessity of my returning to Melbourne in funds. As a matter of fact, it was less the necessity than my own determination, which I can truthfully describe as absolute.

"Money I would have-but how-but how? Would this stranger be open to persuasion-if I told him the truth? No; that would set us all scouring the country for the rest of the night. Why should I tell him? Suppose I left him to find out. out his mistake, would anything be gained? Bunny, I give you my word that I went in to dinner without a definite intention in my head, or one premeditated lie upon my lips. I might do the decent natural thing and explain matters without loss of time; on the other hand, there was no hurry. I had not opened the letter, and could always pretend I had not noticed the initials; meanwhile something might turn up. I could wait a little and see. Tempted I already was, but as yet the temptation was vague, and its very vagueness made me tremble.

"'Bad news, I'm afraid?' said the manager when at last I sat down at his table.

"'A mere annoyance,' I answered-I do assure you-on the spur of the moment and nothing else. But my lie was told; my position was taken; from that moment onward there was no retreat. By implication, without realizing what I was doing, I had already declared myself W. F. Raffles. Therefore W. F. Raffies I would be in that bank for that night. And the devil teach me how to use my lie!"

Again he raised his glass to his lips-I had forgotten mine, His cigarette case caught the gas light as he handed it to me. I shook my head, without taking my eyes from his.

"The devil played up," continued Raffles, with a laugh. "Before I tasted my soup I had decided what to do. I had determined to rob that bank instead of going to bed and to be back in Melbourne for breakfast if the doctor's mare could do it. I would tell the old fellow that I had missed my way and had been bushed for hours, as I easily might have been, and had never got to Yea at all. At Yea, on the other hand, the personation and robbery would ever after be attributed to a member of the gang that had waylaid and murdered the new managed with that very object. You are acquiring some experience in such matters, Bunny. I ask you, was there ever a better get-out? Last night's was something like it, only never such a certainty. And I saw it from the beginning-saw to the end before I had finished my soup.

"To increase my chances the cashier, who also lived in the bank, was away over the holidays, had actually gone down to Melbourne to see us play; and the man who had taken my horse also waited at table, for he and his wife were the only servants, and they slept in a separate building. You may depend I ascertained this before we had finished dinner. Indeed I was by way of asking too many questions (the most oblique and delicate was that which elicited my host's name, Ewbank), nor was I careful enough to conceal their drift.

"'Do you know,' said this fellow Ewbank, who was one of the downright sort, 'if it wasn't you, I should say you were in a

funk about robbers? Have you lost your nerve?' "'I hope not,' said I, turning jolly hot, I can tell you; 'butwell, it's not a pleasant thing to have to put a bullet through a fellow."

Melbourne Cup, and I had the certain winner that didn't win, and that's not the only way you can play the fool in Melbourne. confession in itself. But the others didn't know how hard up I was, on myself, but still less did I know the game I was going to play. and I swore they shouldn't. I tried the Jews, but they're extra fly out there. Then I thought of a kinsman of sorts, a second cousin of my father's whom none of us knew anything about, except that he was supposed to be in one or other of the colonies. If he was a rich man, well and good, I would work him; if not, there would be no harm done. I tried to get on his tracks, and, as luck would have it, I succeeded (or thought I had) at the very moment when I happened to have a few days to myself. I was cut over the hand, just before the big Christmas match, and couldn't have bowled a ball if they had played me.

"The surgeon who fixed me up happened to ask me if I was any of it almost took my breath away. A relation who was a high official in one of the banks, who would finance me on my mere name could anything be better? I made up my mind that this Raffies was the man I wanted, and was awfully sold to find next moment that hewasn't a high official at all. Nor had the doctor so much as met him. galloping after to do the rest. but had merely read of him in connection with a small sensation at the suburban branch which my namesake managed; an armed robber had been rather pluckily beaten off, with a bullet in him, by this Raffles; and the sort of thing was so common out there that this was the first I had heard of it! A suburban branch-my financier had faded into some excellent fellow with a billet to lose if he called his soul his own. Still a manager was a manager, and I said I would soon see whether this was the relative I was looking for, if he would be good enough to give me the name of that branch.

"'I'll do more,' said the doctor. 'I'll get you the name of the branch he's been promoted to, for I think I heard they'd moved him up one already.' And the next day he brought me the name of the township of Yea, some fifty miles north of Melbourne; but, with the vagueness which characterized all his information, he was unable to say whether I should find my relative there or not.

"'He's a single man, and his initials are W. F.,' said the doctor, who was certain enough of the immaterial points. 'He left his old post several days ago, but it appears he's not due at the new one till the New Year. No doubt he'll go before then to take things over and settle in. You might find him up there and you might not. If I were you I should write."

" "That'll lose two days,' said I, 'and more if he isn't there,' for I'd grown quite keen on this up-country manager, and I felt that if I could get at him while the holidays were still on a little conviviality might help matters considerably.

"'Then,' said the doctor, 'I should get a quiet horse and ride. You needn't use that hand.'

"'Can't I go by train?"

"'You can and you can't. You would still have to ride. I suppose you're a horseman?

" 'Yes.'

"'Then I should certainly ride all the way. It's a delightful road. through Whittlesea and over the Plenty Ranges. It'll give you some idea of the bush, Mr. Raffles, and you'll see the sources of the water supply of this city, sir. You'll see where every drop of it comes from, the pure Yan Yean. I wish I had time to ride with you.'

"But where can I get a horse?"

"The doctor thought for a moment.

"T've a mare of my own that's as fat as butter for want of work." said he. 'It would be a charity to me to sit on her back for a hundred miles or so, and then I should know you'd have no temptation to use that hand.'

"'You're far too good,' 1 protested.

"'You're A. J. Raffles,' he said.

"And if ever there was a prettier compliment or a finer instance of even colonial hospitality I can only say, Bunuy, that I never heard of either."

He sipped his whisky, threw away the stump of his cigarette and lit another before continuing.

"Well, I managed to write a line to W. F. wall my own hand, which, as you will gather, was not very badly wounded-it was simply this third finger that was split and in splints-and the next morning the doctor packed me off on a bovine beast that would have done for an ambulance. Half the team came up to see me start: the rest were JUST AS I WAS READY TO GO THERE CAME A VIOLENT rather sick with me for not stopping to see the match out, as if I could

I PULLED UP AND LAY WITH MY EAR TO THE GROUND FOR TWO OR THREE MINUTES .- Posed by Kyrle Bellew.

"It was an interesting ride enough, especially after passing the

place called Whittlesea, a real wild township on the lower slope of the ranges, where I recollect having a deadly meal of hot mutton and tea, miles or so was a good metal road, too good .o go half round the world to ride on, but after Whittlesea it was a mere track over the ranges. a track I often couldn't see and left entirely to the mare. Now it dipped into a gully and ran through a creek, and all the time the local color was inches thick-gum trees galore and parrots, all colors of the rainbow. In one place a whole forest of gums had been ring-barked

and were just as though they had been painted white, without a leaf tilt through the bush, with the saddle twisted around and the stirrup

"'Thank ye, mister.' growled the man, a huge chap in a red-



KNOCKING AT THE OUTER DOOR .- Posed by Kyrle Bellew.

I wasn't the steady old stager I am now, Bunny; my analysis was a help them win by watching them., They little knew the game I'd got checked shirt, with a beard like W. G. Grace, but the very devil of an expression.

"'Been an accident?' said I, reining up.

"'Yes,' said he, scowling as though he defied me to ask any more.

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"Well, Bunny, I may be a blackguard myself, but I don't think I with the thermometer at three figures in the shade. The first thirty ever looked at a fellow as that chap looked at me. But I stared him my wounded bank robber was in prison, dead or at large. out, and forced him to admit that it was blood on the twisted saddle, and after that he became oute tame. He told me exactly what had happened. A mate of his had been dragged under a branch and had his nose smashed, but that was all; had sat tight till he dropped from under the counter all day, and he was only waiting for his chance. loss of blood; another mate was with him back in the bush.

"As I've said already, Bunny, I wasn't the old stager that I am now-in any respect-and we parted good enough friends. He asked relation of Raffles of Raffles of the National bank, and the pure luck. or a living thing I did meet was me which way I was going, and, when I told him, he said I should say 'Of course; I had forgotten!' would have been quite fatal, conthe sort to give you the creeps; it was a riderless horse coming full save seven miles and get a good hour earlier to Yea by striking off sidering what I was supposed to have done. So I looked down my the track and making for a peak that we could see through the trees nose and shook my head. irons ringing. Without thinking, I had a shot at heading him with the and following a creek that I should see from the peak. Don't smile, doctor's mare, and blocked him\* just enough to allow a man who came Bunny! I began by saying I was a child in those days. Of course, the short cut was the long way round, and it was nearly dark when that unlucky mare and I saw the single street of Yea.

down from a veranda.

"'Mr. Rafiles?' said he. "'Mr. Raffles!' said I, laughing, as I shook his hand.

"'You're late.'

"'I was misdirected.'

"'That all? I'm relieved,' he said. 'Do you know what they reluctance.' are saying? There are some brand new bushrangers on the road

between Whittlesea and this-a second Kelly gang! They'd have then down came his fist on the table. caught a Tartar in you, eh? "'They would in you,' I retorted, and my tu quoquo shut him up

and seemed to puzzle him. Yet there was much more sense in it than in his compliment to me, which was absolutely pointless. "'T'm afraid you'll find things pretty rough,' he resumed, when he had unstrapped my valise and handed my reins to his man. 'It's

lucky you're a bachelor like myself.' "I could not quite see the point of this remark either, since, had

I been married I should hardly have sprung my wife upon him in this free and easy fashion. I muttered the conventional sort of thing, and then he said I should find it all right when I settled, as though , young for the place, and my supposed feat a fluke. But I never saw I had come to graze upon him for weeks! 'Well,' thought I, 'these colonials do take the cake for hospitality." And, still marveling, I let him lead me into the private part of the bank.

"'Dinner will be ready in a quarter of an hour,' said he as we entered. 'I thought you might like a tub first, and you'll find all ready in the room at the end of the passage. Sing out if there's anything you want. Your luggage hasn't turned up yet, by the way, but here's a letter that came this morning.'

" 'Not for me?'

"'Yes; didn't you expect one?"

"'I certainly did not!"

"'Well, here it is.'

the previous day-to W. F. Raffles!

"Bunny, you've had your wind bagged at footer, I daresay; you know what that's like? All I can say is that my moral wind was bagged by that letter as I hope, old chap, I have never yet bagged volver before turning in. I kept him out of his bed another twenty yours. I couldn't speak. I could only stand with my own letter in my hands until he had the good taste to leave me by myself.

"W. F. Raffles! We had mistaken each other for W. F. Rafflesfor the new manager who had not yet arrived! Small wonder we had conversed at cross purposes; the only wonder was that we had not discovered our mutual mistake. How the other man would have matter for me! I saw the whole thing in a flash, without a tremor, but wint the direct depression from my own single point of view. Call it callous if you like, Bunny, but remember that I was in much the same hole as you've since been in yourself, and that I had counted on this W. F. Raffles even as you counted on A. J. I thought of the my second wind for the big deed of the night. man with the W. G. beard-she riderless horse with the bloody saddle -the deliberate misdirection that had put me off the track and out

""'No?' said he, coolly. 'I should enjoy nothing better myself; besides, yours didn't go through."

"'I wish it had" I was smart enough to cry.

"'Amen,' said he. "And I emptied my glass. Actually I did not know whether

"But, now that I had had more than enough of it, Ewbank would come back to the subject. He admitted that the staff was small, but as for himself, he had a loaded revolver under his pillow all night.

"'Under the counter, eh?' I was ass enough to say,

"'Yes: so had you!"

"He was looking at me in surprise, and something told me that to

"'But the papers said you had!' he cried.

" 'Not under the counter,' said I.

"But it's the regulation!"

"For the moment, Bunny, I felt stumped, though I trust I only "I was looking for the bank when a fellow in a white suit ran looked more superior than before, and I think I justified my look.

" "The regulation!" I said at length, in the most offensive tone at my command. 'Yes, the regulation would have us all dead men! My dear sir, do you expect your bank robber to let you reach for your gun in the place where he knows it's kept? I had mine in my pocket, and I got my chance by retreating from the counter with all visible

"Ewbank stared at me with open eyes and a five-barred forehead,

"'By God! that was smart! Still,' he added, like a man who would not be in the wrong, 'the papers said the other thing, you know!"

"'Of course,' I rejoined, 'because they said what I told them. You wouldn't have me advertise the fact that I improved upon the bank's regulations, would you?"

"So that cloud rolled over, and by jove it was a cloud with a golden lining! Not silver-real good Australian gold! For old Ewbank hadn't quite appreciated me till then; he was a hard nut, a much older man than myself, and I felt pretty sure he thought me a man change his mind more openly. He got out his best brandy, he made me throw away the cigar I was smoking, and opened a fresh box. He was a convivial looking party, with a red mustache, and a very humorous face (not unlike Tom Emmett's), and from that moment I laid myself out to attack him on his convivial flank. But he wasn't a Rosenthall, Bunny; he had a treble seamed, hand-sewed head, and could have drunk me under the table ten times over.

"'All right.' I thought, 'you may go to bed sober, but you'll sleep like a timber yard." And I threw half he gave me through the open open window, when he wasn't looking.

"But he was a good chap, Ewbank, and don't you imagine he was at all intemperate. Convivial I called him, and I only wish he had "And, as he lit me to my room I read my own superscription of been something more. He did, however, become more and more genial as the evening advanced, and I had not much difficulty in getting him to show me round the bank at what was really an unearthly hour for such a proceeding. It was when he went to fetch the reminutes, and I knew every inch of the business premises before I shook hands with Ewbank in my room.

"You won't guess what I did with myself for the next hour. I undressed and went to bed. The incessant strain involved in even the most deliberate impersonation is the most wearing thing I know. Then how much more so when the impersonation is impromptu! laughed! But I-I could not laugh. By jove, no, it was no laughing There's no getting your eye in; the next word may bowl you out; it's batting in a bad light all through. I haven't told you of half the tight places I was in during a conversation that ran into hours and became dangerously intimate toward the end. You can imagine them for yourself, and then picture me spread out on my bed, getting

"Once more I was in luck, for I had not been lying there long before I heard my dear Ewbank snoring like a harmonium, and the of the way-and now the missing manager and the report of bush- music never ceased for a moment; it was as loud as ever when I crept rangers at this end. But I simply don't pretend to have felt any out and closed my door behind me, as regular as ever when I stopped personal pity for a man whom I had never seen; that kind of to listen at his. And I have still to hear the concert that I shall